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ABSTRACT

This paper, presented at a special meeting held in Tehran, discusses the values and manifestations of culture in books for children and presents some practical suggestions for maintaining cultural values. (JM)

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CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN THE SERVICE OF INTERNATIONAL UNDERSTANDING AND PEACEFUL CO-OPERATION

ORGANIZED BY THE
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Children's Literature in the Service of

International Understanding and Peaceful Co-operation

Tehran, 15-21 May 1975

The Creation of the Children Book and the Cultural Values

Leny Werneck Dornelles

Brazil

"Allow me", Klee continues, "to resort to a parable, the parable of the tree. Let us take an artist well oriented in the world and in life, well able to represent phenomenons and experiences. This kind of being oriented by things from the nature and the life, this complex organization, of multiple ramifications, I should like to compare them t the roots of the tree. From there the sap comes up to the artist in order to seize him and catch his eye: he therefore takes on the function of the trunk. Pressed and agitated by this poweful flux, he transmits to his work what he has seen. And th work, as the crown of the tree, expands in time and in space. Nobody would require from the tree that it should form its crown to the image of its roots".

CONSIDERATIONS

Whom do we write for, when we make a children book? For what purpose we decide (sometimes daringly) to put on printed paper our message? These are subjective questions with which all of us, sooner or later, are confronted.

Among the many confrontations the subject allows, I would like to try concentrating on one view which worries a lot and which should, I believe, retain our attention in this seminar.

It is that of culture, its values and manifestations, in books for children.

I do it with the certainty that I will just be touching the problem without any intention to exhaust it or to present definite solutions. The author for children book, as stated by Paul Klee, should take over the role of the trunk. He should be "well oriented in the world and in life, well able to represent phenomenos and experiences". The creations, as an individual process, should be intimately related to the cultural reality from where it stems and which is its destiny. Paradoxically, that is what makes its universality.

Let me give an example which will explain this point of view. It is the beautiful book The Hero of Champions, published by The publications Department, Institute for the Intellectual Development of Children and Young Adults, Tehran, in 1971.

It is the re-creation of an ancient persian tale called poriaych Valee, in which the texts and the beautiful illustrations feflect a millennial culture, but not without being contemporaneous. The tacit cultural values in the story have been revised, without harming the plot: an old fighter, holder of the utmost title of the champions, is defied by a young man who wants this title for himself. The old and the new in confrontation, this is the question. In the ancient solution, the old fighter sacrifices himself to the young fighter who, for his turn, deserved recriminations for this false pride and pretension. In the today's version, the old man prepares himself for the fight and this develops normally. The old fighter loses and gives up the title with dignity - the young deserves it. It is a Persian legend, a Persian book, both deeply rooted in the Persian Culture. The values are universal.

The book above mentioned is the result of studies, researches an

purposes. It did not appear casually. And this obliges us to certain reflexions.

As authors and responsible persons for publishing programs (publishers), we frequently meet deadlock situations - members of transitional societies, we suffer, culturally, in Brazil and in Latin America, the effects of technological impact in our traditional structures. The development (+) "is much more than the manifest acceptance of material and technological advances; it is also a cultural, social and psychological process".

(+) Foster, G.M. - The Traditional Cultures and the Impact of Technology. It is curious to observe the effects of the dichotomy between the technological and cultural development, in publishing books for children in our transitional societies. Instead of starting from the child, speaking from an editorial point of view (taking as a point of reference and quality, the adequation to the clients and the economic feasibility, to the production, the process is inverted. The publisher, who is also a printer, having made great investments for purchasing the printing equipment, always expensive, and knowing its rentability when well used (the Brazilian publishers, in their majority, known almost all the American and European printing plants), wishes that his machines develop the same level of production as the American and European printing plants which they visit frequently. And the over-prized equipment begins to be the determinant of the creation: it is necessary to create quickly, with a minimum of editorial costs, in order to obtain processing rentability.

It is also curious to observe the difference of level between the

technical knowledge of the persons who run the graphic equipment and those who work preparing the book. The technicians responsible for the machinery are frequently trained abroad and execute highly specialized jobs. The people working in the editing sectors - editors-layout-men, mounters, visual programmers - do not receive the same assistance and frequently are self-taught persons.

All this evidently interferes in the creative process. The "acceptance of material and technological advances" interferes and imposes products to the "cultural, social and psychological process".

We all know that the book is a product of integrated work, of team work, which requires a certain equilibrium between culture and economics so that the product meets the needs of the consumer from these two points of view.

It is noticeable, however, that the economic point of view dominates over the cultural side. Publishers and printers have an access to advanced technology. But what about the authors, the illustrators and the editorial coordinators? For the purpose for an equilibrated development, from the technological and cultural point of view, it is important that the contact with other societies take place on these two planes and not only on the first, that is of technology, already attained by the graphic people. According to Foster, in terms of cultural values, "the societies which maintain a closer contact with others change more rapidly and become more complex than those who give less opportunities to their members to have relationship with other groups".

I believe that we have here a fundamental point for the author and the editorial coordinator of the children book: to keep in touch

with other creative manifestations, products of alien cultures without losing their own, "this orientation towards the things of nature and of life, this complex organization, of multiple ramifications," which Paul Klee compares with the roots of the tree. Letus return to the example of the Iranian book (or still to some Japanese books). One feels in these books the equilibrium between modern technology in the excellent printing the finishing, in the editorial and graphic production, and the cultural, social and psychological ripening which appear within the proposition of the plot of the story, in the profile of the characters and their visual configuration. This is still a challenge for us in our efforts for the children book in Brazil and Perhaps in Latin America.

It is usual for us to criticize the low quality of the originals of new nationaal authors and to compare them with the great number of translations from the competitors. There are radicalisms in this instance. I will seize the two problems separately, still from the point of view of cultural values.

The national author frequently adopts the behaviour of the ostrich, hiding its head in the sand. Culturally isolated from the best that is done in the rest of the world and suffering from the impact of pop literature imported by the means of mass communication, which discourages research and study, he alienates and unroots himself. If the national author rejects (in a conscient or unconscient process) to act contemporaneously and turns back to a nostalgic vision and to the rethoric of his childhood memories, he runs the risk to have his message lost. If he tries to copy foreign models, as for an example, the imported heroes of the technologic mythology (Batman, Superman, etc) he would certainly

not fare well. A tree has its roots; their crowns differ. To work out the reality is the crucial point of the author of books for children.

I have noticed, as points deserving criticism in terms of cultural values and with reference to the creation of texts for children, the following, concerning new authors who try to have their books published:

-The impoverishment of the cultural heritage

Authors that turn to the past but do not know to extract authentic situations therefrom. There are the false memorialists who present fanciful, emlodramatic visions of stereotyped characters and many times prejudiced. The popular characters are those who most suffer this distortion - the old black man from the farm is always loyal, obsequious; the female domestic servant is always ignorant and "funny" . Both talk as if they were insane. The characterization of the rural or urban environment is also frequently poor. The authors limit themselves to physical descriptions (I would say almost geographical) showing lack of knowledge of the inter-relation nature-culture, of the importance of rites and myths which constitute the traditional of a society. Christenings, marriages, brithdays are merely feasts for these authors. There is however a whole universe to be explored.

-The bad use of the imaginary

In a period when the phantastic realism has in Latin American authors its major exponents in adult literature, I find, in texts that I receive, a great many of stories well conceived but purely carried out, from the point of view of the resources from the imaginary and the phantastic. The solutions leaning on TV gags or of comics of international use, are frequently mechanized machine solutions which take on human or

animal frustrations and robotized fairies who use their powers foolishly. In science fiction, poorness is also evident. We frequently meet with stories of children who enter in time machines and start, outside of the past, to learn the history of the country, talking with Pedro Alvares Cabral, have a coffee with the Emperor Pedro II. This is old-fashioned, and somehow dishonest, according to my feelings.

- We still have to notice the lack of scientific research and new information, in the area of non-fiction.

The biographies, a rare genre, reproduce almost invariably the same heroic feats, the same epic phrases of 50 years ago, in a tiresome repetition. The animals shown are almost the same. Among the exceptions in this area are the books by Flavida Da Silveria Lobo, the only one to present a study of the Brazilian animal life for children, and Geir Campos, a poet who presents a vigorous contribution to the biographic genere in "which is the story of today"?

- Folklore is frequently forgotten and disfigured or else simply repeated, in accordance with anthropological researches but without any appeal to arouse the child-reader's interest. I know that Melhoramentos is preparing in co-edition with INL a well elaborated series of Brazilian Legends. I myself had a stimulating experience in this area when re-writing for Which is the story of Today? from Expressao a Cultura, some themes on Brazilian folklore.

-To choose the theme based on the most proximate origin (Indian, African, European), follow the path of acculturation of the characters and of the plot, define their psychologic profile, in view of the reader's interest, are real challenges.

It is difficult to be contemporaneous, in this sense, having in mind the social transformation through which we go on this continent. But it is necessary to try and to insist in being it.

Let us now see still focusing the cultural values, the problem of translated books.

The fact that about 50% of our editorial production is being based on translations, has been severely criticized. In my opinion it is not a problem of quantity but of quality. International contacts and the access to documents and recent researches have given me a certain critical vision of the universe of the children book and its multiple relations with the different cultures where it is integrated. And I notice that the major failure in our editorial programs of translation is that we frequently wish to print in our countries what "is most sold abroad", instead of selecting works which, on account of the crative quality, (integrate with dignity, another, culture, other values which can enrich the reader's sensibility,) from the cultural point of view, and can also be profitable, from the economic point of view.

From this point of view, let us consider the publisher: for him it is easier to purchase the ready and successful material which, aside of the low graphic costs, simplifies his editorial work for whose execution there are not many specialists among us. We still must consider the lack of knowledge (result of the differences between the technologic and cultural levels), among those who publish, of good raw materials stemming from our sources and which need only a good editorial refinement. I believe we can accept the fact that part of the publications for children in Brazil and in Latin America are translations. Sweden, a highly

developed country, accepts this calmly, their justification being linguistic and cultural reasons.

In 1972, for 284 titles of Swedish authors, there were 259 translations. (statistical survey of Swedish Books for Children and Young people, compiled by Lars Furuland, Dept. of Sociology of Literature Villay 5,5752 36 uppsala).

'We must reject simply purchasing the sub-products of foreign technology in detriment of an equilibrated editorial program, based on our cultural values and the needs for changes (searched for and not imposed).

The race after the foreign best-seller is deceitful. The financially more successful publishers are those who build up, based on the inherent quality of the work, national or foreign, and not in function of the fashion.

SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESTIONS

It is usual that in meetings like this recommendations and proposals for a line of action be offered.

I will make no exception to the rule in this work, which, as I said before, only represents an approach to the many and complex questions. Before, I shall take as a basis, some reflexions contained in a document from Francois Fauches, French publisher of the series Pere Castor (Flammarion) who was in Brazil at the end of 1973 for a visit which is a part of the technical and cultural interchange program established between the French and Brazilian IBBY sections. It may seem contradictory, that in search for cultural solutions for a problem that is ours, I make use of a foreign statement, but I believe that this

prospective, sensible and honest view is what we are missing sometimes while we should make use and take advantage of it whenever possible. And that is what Francois Fauches said:

"Above all, try a human and circumspect, sincere, attentive and cordial approach of the public, both of the children as well as of the adolescents and adults in order to make them discover the power of the assimilated reading, because the real literature should be owned by its public, stimulated, inspired and produced by the public.

This approach would allow the artists, the authors and the sociologists to establish a "catalog" of themes, of needs and of means of expression to such a pichness which soon would surpass the possibilities of the imagination.

The sources of inspiration would not be taken from intellectual lucubrations, but from real life (football, macumba, samba, folklore, etc.), even if these daily life scenes would seem to be obstacles to a "brilliant evolution".

In the area of the graphic point of view, a research of authentic forms could be carried out. An artist may be inspired, for instance, by typically Brazilian vegetal forms, in horizontallines. His palett would be enriched by the so manyfold colours, of the plant and animal life of the country (colour of the insects, etc).

The traditional art (Indian tatooing, weaving, ceramics) may inspire the graphic artists.

Summing up, to renew with the existing, with what still is being made, more than to be tempted only by the imaginary.

To coordinate and accelerate a coherent program, team-work seems

necessary to me. Leaving aside exceptional cases which are seldom, personal work for a public not yet friendly towards reading, turns out to be a luxury which annot be approached without having a certain number of "Keys" supplied by a culture which is rather mundane than practical.

It is necessary therefore to work in groups, to join the talents and the capacities in a collective work, with the idea that everyone gives his best without claiming the paternity.

The stimulation of "ateliers for research and creatinn" could meet with a favourable and useful support from the schools. That would allow social, linguistic, artesian, folkloric and other researches in certain regions which would be a starting point to establish a "program catalog" to be carried out finally, perhaps even using local technical resources which, being economical, would not therefore be less aesthetic,

I propose to elaborate recommendations and action programs based on this meeting. A reminder, as a suggestion:

-To the author or to the one having a potentiality to develop, should be given the opportunity of critique, of an analysis of his work, from several views of knowledge, including his colleagues, the specialized critique and the public;

-That the persons engaged in the process of creating children books be given the opportunity to know and to confront the production of other societies. Not in order to copy models (which is quite frequent among unrooted authors and publishers urged by sales) or exenophobe and self-compensating rejections ("This is very good but is unsuitable for us"), but for a well-balanced search of quality.

- That the publisher may give to his "business" of publishing books

a wider projection: not viewing the immediate sales possibilities but building up his company, solidly, at a medium and a long term, viewing the children book as a cultural object without losing it as an economic product;

- That regional meetings of authors and publishers be intensified, and systematic studies of book planning, in accordance with our social and economic rality, be facilitated through scholarships;

- that contacts with good authors from other countries and regions be intensified, facilitating the circulation of good foreign works, of bullentins and publications of entitles of recognized international value, as, for instance, the Bookbird, of the International Board on Books for the Young people. And that these entities and publications be open to our Latin American manifestations, following an equal standard of quality. But all this, or rather, nothing of this will be of any avail if we do not, each one for himself, in a unique process of auto-recreation, what Paul Klee brings implicity in his parable: to deepen our roots. It is urgently necessary to put into practice our cultural reality, to know and identify ourselves with its popular manifestations, and to cover our needs from that source. It is only this way we can improve our creative process. And offer better books for the children and the youngsters of our societies. "preseed and agitated by this powerful flux he transmits to his work what he has seen. And the work, like the crown of the tree, branches out in time and space".